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ABSTRACT

Behavioral scientists maintain that a board-superintendent relationship thrives only within a total organization that is sound and healthy. To develop such an organization, agreement should be reached at the onset on what exactly is board policy and prerogative and what is in the administrative domain. A board must develop its goals with the superintendent, and both must know and accept their duties and responsibilities and value the roles and contributions of each. The superintendent supplies the board information from many sources without being asked, and the board disseminates policy statements to the staff and community. A healthy group has developed ways to resolve conflict, or is continually searching for the ways to do it. (MLF)

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Volume 14/Number 2/February 1983

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Boards and Superintendents

How to have a healthy relationship

By Ben Brodinsky

"It takes two to tango," President Reagan said recently, commenting on relations between a chief executive and Congress.

"Here in Japan, the manager and his board of overseers work as brothers. We're a human community," said a Japanese industrialist asked about the success of Japanese industry.

"United we stand, divided we fall," is the thrust of a chapter on the board-superintendent relationship in Becoming a Better Board Member, *a comprehensive book recently published by the National School Boards Association.*

"Teamwork, teamwork, teamwork: That's the secret of good relations between a board and superintendent," say speakers, brochures, leaflets, and pronunciamentos *coming from both superintendents and school boards.*

Such is the gist of the wisdom offered to school leaders as they try to work together to provide high quality schooling for our children.

Such wisdom is not unlike being told to keep warm and get a good night's sleep for a cold. While sometimes true and partly useful, the advice doesn't get into the heart of the matter: How do you tango? How does one act as a brother? How can we function as teammates?

An answer from scientists

Behavioral scientists may be able to help us in understanding the complex art of a group working with a chief executive. During the past decades, they have taken a fresh look at, and acquired new insights into, how a group functions and what contributes to its effectiveness.

Their new outlook is to view a group as an organism, functioning in a climate and atmosphere that affects every part of its operation. Their concern is with the total organism, and its health—which is to say, the health of the *entire* group.

Whether you're a board member or a school administrator, if you want to assure a sound board-superintendent relationship, you should know this: Such a relationship thrives only within a total organization that is sound and healthy.

This "total organization" idea advanced by behavioral scientists is now being summarized and applied to educational administration by professors of educational administration James A. Conway, State University of New York at Buffalo, and Linda Shieve of Syracuse University. They see the school system as a totality, every part of which must maintain organizational health to carry out its mission of educating children.

Organizational health, they stress, must be present above all at the head of the body—which, for school systems, is the board of education and the superintendent.

Implications for boards

What, then, are the characteristics of a healthy board of education as it seeks to work through an administrator for a common mission—the education of children? How does a board develop harmonious relations with the superintendent to carry out effectively the mission of the board?

A healthy group is primarily concerned with goals. Without goals, a board flounders. It gets off the beam. It zigzags from one problem to another, and from one so-called "crisis" to another, without plan or purpose. It picks on little things and gets involved in trivia. Without goals, a board is likely to develop cliques and indulge in personality discussions.

Worse, without goals, the board and superintendent have little common ground upon which to work.

Therefore, for its organizational health, a board *must* develop its goals *with* the superintendent. This is the first factor in a board's smooth relations with its chief executive. As board and superintendent work together, opportunities expand for rapport and to get to know one another's feelings and attitudes. And to agree on goals.

Some of the goals originate with the superintendent; others with members of the board; still others stem from staff and the public. Superintendent and board sift and select, assign priorities, and arrive at a common understanding with regard to long-range and short-range goals.

Long-range goals may include curricular revisions, overhaul of the inservice program, or updating the report cards for students. These long-range goals should be written and adopted by the board, and placed in its policy manual.

Short-range goals may include expansion of the school bulletin to parents, initiation of a teacher of the year award, or planting of shrubbery on school grounds. The main point is that goals give unity to the board, and weld the superintendent to

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board activities. This creates a strong and solid base for a harmonious relationship between the board and superintendent.

It is also characteristic of a healthy group that the goals are clear to all concerned—board, superintendent, staff, students, and public. The board calls for frequent progress reports and gives the superintendent opportunities to ask for help: to revise or modify goals, if necessary.

In a healthy organization, each person, or group of persons, knows his duties and responsibilities—and accepts them. In turn, each respects and values the roles and contributions of others in the group. This characteristic is especially important to the educational management team. The board's duties and responsibilities are defined by law and by practice, and should be spelled out in the policy manual section on board governance. They center on legislative functions: on defining policy, first of all; and second, on evaluating the entire operational activity in the light of policy.

But does each side *accept* these precepts? Within a troubled school board, members do not toe the line of policy development as they should. They poke arm, leg, and busy finger into administration—seeking to run some things at some time in some way. Similarly, with a troubled school board, the administrator steps into ad hoc policy formulation by dictating and pushing through "policy," which often is really administrative baggage.

Such criss-crossing of actions leads to overlap, confusion, tension, and umbrage, and intensifies the ails of a school board and its relations with the superintendent. The origin of this illness lies in a lack of respect by each side for the other's talents and contributions.

The healthy school board values the competence of the superintendent. Board members see the superintendent as a trained professional who can deal with problems of curriculum, staff relations, finance, maintenance, and public relations—to mention but some of the major aspects of administration.

In turn, the superintendent respects the political wisdom that board members bring to school governance. The superintendent values the members' closeness to the electorate, and esteems the ideas members bring to problems. He shows consideration for the community concerns board members want to place on the agenda, and is respectful of the arguments board members offer on any issue, problem, or topic. Above all, he never forgets that the *board* hired *him*. This understanding of each other's role should be reflected in policy statements on board-superintendent relations, and in the superintendent's job description.

A healthy group eagerly receives information and, just as eagerly, gives information. It is continually involved in communicating. In this two-way process, the superintendent is the chief agent. Through this process, board and superintendent develop interaction and a commonality of interests.

The healthy group has a voracious appetite for facts, ideas, concepts, projections. The superintendent supplies these on a continuing basis *without being asked*. The superintendent gathers the information from scores of sources: federal, state, and local agencies; staff members; and committees of the board, as well as other committees set up by the administration. The superintendent also provides the board with information from consultants, from the public, and from students.

In turn, the healthy board generates and gives out information. Again, the superintendent plays a key part. Through an active public information program (based on board policy), he sees to it that board policy statements are disseminated to the staff and to the community. He tells the press, the staff, and parents about important decisions at board meetings. He provides the community with summaries of reports made at board meetings, and he prepares data that point to successes and problems of the school system.

In the words of behavioral scientists, "communications adequacy" is a strong characteristic of a healthy group. In this connection, behavioral scientists say that a healthy group enjoys "distortion-free communication, vertically and horizontally, and over and across the boundary of that group. People have the information they need and get it without exerting undue effort."

Again, the responsibility for providing the board with information belongs to the superintendent and it pays off both for him and the board with an interactive relationship.

A healthy group has the capacity to solve problems and reach decisions. A vigorous board of education is not afraid of problems, nor of coping with them. It is sensitive to problems and faces them with confidence, and it does so without blaming someone "out there" for their existence.

With this confident attitude, the board has the superintendent as a partner and active co-worker in solving school system problems. The result is an effective, binding relationship.

The superintendent helps the board identify problems. He calls the board's attention to those that have high urgency, and he then provides the board with facts to help understand the problem.

Possible solutions may come from either side. It promotes healthy relations between board and administrator when either side is free to offer alternative approaches without fear of reproach or accusation.

Board members belittle themselves when they say, "What do I know about this problem? Let the superintendent find the answer." Nor is the superintendent playing

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fair with the board when he sits back expecting the board to provide answers, because, "After all, the board has final responsibility for that one. . . ." Such attitudes are not the mark of a healthy group.

The solution of a problem requires a free and inventive spirit among board members and the administration. This spirit brings forth many options and alternatives—enough to avoid the feeling that the superintendent is trapping the board into a course of action or that the board is locking itself in.

Once a problem has been explored to the extent that time and energy allow, it is time for action. The board can look properly to the superintendent for a summation and synthesis of the many points of view expressed on a problem. The vote or agreement for consensus is the final step in the long process of turning from words to action—a process in which both the board and superintendent have been involved.

One wholesome outcome of such a joint venture into problem solving and decision making is that there is no room or occasion for *blaming*. The healthy group needs no scapegoats. Each of the parties knows there are no perfect solutions and no perfect decisions. Some solutions will work; some will fail; some will work some of the time; some will have to be revised in due time. Once the joint action is behind them, both sides know that both are responsible for the results and each side should be willing to let the results speak for themselves.

A healthy group has developed ways to resolve conflict among its members—or is continually searching for the ways to do it. Conflict and the potentials for conflict are ever-present phenomena in any association of two or more human beings. Overtly or covertly, they are present within a school system and affect relations between superintendent and board as well as among board members.

There is nothing new, tragic, or disastrous in the existence of conflict. It's the way it is managed that counts. Managed poorly, things can turn into disaster; managed correctly, conflict can serve as a constructive force.

Obviously, no board can be productive if it is constantly split by conflict. The healthy group, like any healthy organism fighting disease, takes steps to minimize, if not eliminate, conflict.

Not surprisingly, written board goals and policies—accepted by members and superintendent—are one of the best balms for conflict. So is a common concentration on solving problems: A board and superintendent busy with finding solutions are too busy to fight one another. Similarly, the group that respects one another's roles and contributions is more immune to conflict, as a healthy group has built-in defenses against the break-out of this disease.

Of course, there are times when one party or side—either board or superintendent—believes that what it wants is incompatible with what the other party or side wants.

Crash, bang! One side or another flings down the gauntlet and engages in a traditional approach to conflict that behavioral scientists call "fight" or "flight." Often considered the only way to settle a conflict, this approach is rooted in the attitude that the party with the greatest power must *win* and the one with less power must *lose*.

Behavioral scientists now tell us that the healthy group follows the win-win approach: no one loses, both sides win, and the final result may be a new basis for close and harmonious relations between board and superintendent. Here are the kinds of behaviors, on part of either the superintendent or the board, that promote a win-win result:

- Each protects the image of the other.
- No one puts down or disparages the other.
- No one claims that what he wants is the greatest, the best, the only.
- Humility is the mood during a controversy between board and superintendent.
- Everyone listens.

No one plays the martyr. No one plays the hero. No one seeks revenge. No one seeks vindication. Everyone seeks compromise—without sacrificing the strength of an idea or proposal. Everyone is eager to come out of the conflict and to achieve the same goal: to benefit the school system, its children, and the cause of education. ■

Decide now to decide

Some boards are comfortable with the arrangement they have with their superintendents. They say: "He always knows just what to do." Some of these boards are right. Others are lucky. Still others have taken some critical steps to ensure their superintendent *knows* what they want.

One such step is to agree at the outset on what exactly *is* board policy and prerogative and what is in the administrative domain. A workshop setting, though not essential, can be useful for arriving at such determinations. Away from the everyday pressures of school system management, the board and superintendent can brainstorm all school matters they can think of, and determine the degree of authority each has over them:

- Will the superintendent have total authority to decide and act within limits of law, board policy, propriety, and common sense?
- Will the superintendent have complete authority to act, but must later advise the board about decisions and actions?
- Must the superintendent obtain prior approval from the board before taking any action?
- Or, will the board retain the right to decide, but request or permit a recommendation from the superintendent?

Too often, you hear: "The board sets policy and the superintendent develops regulations to carry out that policy." Many board members, even board veterans, regard that to be as clear as eggnog. Here is a general rule: Board policy should tell what is wanted and also may include why and how much. Regulations, on the other hand, should tell how, by whom, where, and when things are to be done.

In theory this is fine. But the real answer to the policy/regulation question lies within each individual board and its chief executive officer. The content of any policy should be decided upon only after an agreement has been reached regarding who has the decision-making authority for what. ■